"Health care is vital to all of us some of the time but public health is vital to all of us all of the time."

~C. Everett Koop, MD, former U.S. Surgeon General

What is public health?

Public health is "the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts and informed choices of society, organizations, public and private, communities and individuals." (1920, C.E.A. Winslow)

It is concerned with threats to the overall health of a community based on population health analysis. The population in question can be as small as a handful of people or as large as all the inhabitants of several continents (for instance, in the case of a pandemic).

There are 2 distinct characteristics of public health:

1. It deals with preventive rather than curative aspects of health.
2. It deals with population-level, rather than individual-level health issues

What is the difference between public health and private healthcare?

Public Health	vs.	Private Healthcare
Focus on population		Focus on individual
Emphasis on prevention, health promotion for the whole community		Emphasis on diagnosis and treatment, care for the whole patient
Biological sciences central, stimulated by major threats to health of populations		Biological sciences central, stimulated by need of patients

Varied interventions targeting the environment, human behavior/lifestyle and medical care		Predominant intervention is medical care
Public service ethic, tempered by concerns for the individual		Personal service ethic, conditioned by awareness of social responsibilities
		(Fineberg, 1990)

Public health uses a population-based approach to health. Here are some examples of how this approach works:

- Prevents pollution of our air and land through enforcement of regulatory controls and management of hazardous wastes;

- Ensures that our drinking and recreational waters are safe;

- Eradicates life-threatening diseases such as smallpox and polio;

- Controls and prevents infectious diseases and outbreaks such as measles, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and the Ebola virus;

- Reduces death and disability due to unintentional injuries through the formulation of policies designed to protect the safety of the public, such as seat belt and worker safety laws;

- Facilitates community empowerment to improve mental health, reduce substance abuse, and social violence;

- Promotes healthy lifestyles to prevent chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and obesity;

- Educates populations at risk to reduce sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, and infant mortality;

- Ensures access to cost-effective care; and

- Evaluates the effectiveness of clinical and community-based interventions.

(Association of Schools of Public Health, 2001)

What are the essential public health services?

- Monitoring health status to identify community health problems;

- Diagnosing and investigating health problems and health hazards in the community;

- Informing, educating, and empowering people about health issues;

- Mobilizing community partnerships to identify and solve health problems;
- Developing policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts;
- Enforcing laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety;
- Linking people to needed personal health services and assuring the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable;
- Ensuring a competent public health and personal health care work force;
- Evaluating effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services; and
- Researching for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.

(Public Health Functions Steering Committee, 1994)